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Distressed Nun, The [supplemental material]

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The Distressed Nun, by Isaac Crookenden

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Full Title

The Distressed Nun.

Summary

Luvildo di Brindoli, Florentine nobleman, had two children—a son, Vincentio and a daughter, Herselia. Vincentio bitterly envied Herselia believing that his father loved her more. One night Brindoli received two guests—Count Fovolli and his handsome young son, Henri Velasquez. Herselia instantly fell in love with Henry and confided the matter in his brother who contrived a plot to ruin her happiness forever. Accordingly, he encouraged Herselia to elope with Henry the next day, and secretly informed Brindoli about it.

The next morning, Brindoli apprehended Herselia outside the palace, and condemned her to a life in a remote convent. After weeks in desolation, Henry discovered the fate of Herselia and left in search of her on horseback. An old lady, Maria, welcomed him into her hut for a night's rest.

Back in Florence, soon after Herselia's mother's death Fovolli challenged Brindoli to a duel. When they met, Brindoli killed Fovolli with his pistol. After this, Brindoli fell seriously ill and died shortly after. Then Vincentio instructed the abbess to impose barbarous punishment on Herselia. The abbess imprisoned Herselia in a dark dungeon near the convent. Henry, meanwhile, left the hut the next day, wandering in search of Herselia, and accidentally discovered the place of her confinement. He quickly rescued her and took her to the safety of Maria's hut. Back in Florence, Vincentio married an Italian whore who killed him with poison and ended her life too. Just then, people came to know about Herselia and Henry who arrived at the palace to the delight of all. After a period of mourning, they married, uniting the two nobilities in love and harmony.

Constellation of Knowledge/Historical Context

Written by Isaac Crookenden, *The Distressed Nun*, was part of a series of chapbooks he published together, two of which had Catholic themes. Compared to other Gothic works, *The Distressed Nun* pays a very limited amount of attention to the anti-Catholic theme in the story. Instead, the chapbook revolves around the jealous monstrosity of a brother against his own sister; even the villainous role played by the abbess is directly instigated by the malcontent, Vincentio. So, as far as the tradition is concerned, the chapbook lends itself for an alignment with the anti-aristocratic-medieval-Italian-Catholic tradition. While, the chapbook does aim its vitriol against the dark deeds of horror committed within the walls of the Catholic cloisters, it largely scoffs at the ideals of nobility and virtue of the Italian aristocrats.

The Distressed Nun is a story of fatal fraternal jealousy in an Italian aristocratic family. A brother's unjustified hatred for his sister sparks off a series of misfortune for her, notably symbolized by her entrapment. First, Herselia's father condemns her to a life in the convent and next, her brother Vincentio worsens it by licensing the abbess to add a barbarous punishment to imprisonment.

Entrapment of a damsel in distress acquires an identifiable anti-Catholic motive due to its connection with the cloistered convent of the nuns. The cruel, heartless and sadistic abbess is made to look like the personification of the veiled barbarity of the Catholic religious who profess to embrace a life of purity, innocence and Christian virtue.

Who but a handsome, chivalric hero can come to the rescue of a damsel in distress? Henry rescues Herselia not only from her terrible confinement in the convent, but also from a life of loneliness and gloom. His heroics bring her safely back to her father's palace for a life of happiness, prosperity and peace. Henry, like the author, becomes the chief architect of Herselia's restoration to her rightful place in the palace. In his role of Herselia's lover-

rescuer, Henry limns himself as a non-aristocratic, non-Italian, romantic English super hero who espouses nobility of the heart and a spirit of adventure and courage.

In this chapbook, letters chiefly serve the purpose of augmenting the conflict. The letters exchanged between Brindoli and Fovolti intensify the animosity between the two noblemen, dragging them to a duel and death. Letters reveal the medieval, aristocratic tendency to take the written word as representing the person and honor of its writer/dictator.

Key Words

Entrapment

See pages 4, 6, 8, 12. The notion of entrapment is a prevalent motif in gothic literature. There are two main types of entrapment which can be observed in such works: physical and psychological entrapment of the character(s).

Physical entrapment occurs when a character's body is constrained within a particular physical setting and he is unable to get himself out of that setting. Such is the case when Frankenstein's monster is entrapped in a body which Frankenstein had created for him.

Psychological entrapment is manifested in the form of inescapable, agonizing tensions within a character's mind. For example, Frankenstein is psychologically entrapped when he has to make a decision either to create a female monster or risk his family being murdered by his original monster.

The entrapment of characters in gothic literature mirrors the entrapment faced by individuals in the Victorian society. These individuals were entrapped because they were forced to repress certain desires that they had, for example, sexual desires, in order to observe strict Victorian social decorum and rules and work towards an ordered society.

Besides being entrapped in such an oppressive society, the Victorians may have also found themselves entrapped in a rapidly changing world. With the onset of urbanization, the Industrial Revolution and the Financial Revolution, they might have felt entrapped as they were unable to escape the resulting changes that were taking place.

On another level, the readers of gothic literature might feel a sense of entrapment too because they are forced to accept the typical presence of the uncanny, the supernatural, and other unfamiliar elements coupled with secrecy and the withholding of certain facts in the literature. For instance, when one reads *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, one might feel entrapped when the story does not reveal facts such as the identity of the omniscient narrator or the real reason for Hyde murdering Sir Danvers Carew.

Source: Fernandez, Claudine. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Landscape

Landscape plays an important function in gothic literature, although its significance varies according to the socio-historical context in which a particular gothic text is found, and obviously according to the narrative structure of the individual text as well. In early gothic texts such as in the novels of Ann Radcliffe, protagonists (often young, sheltered and naïve girls) undertook journeys to a far-off, exoticised land which was portrayed as a realm of danger, excess, and the breakdown of the controls and restrictions of the domestic and “civilized” space. Thus these exotic lands – often the stereotypical Catholic and Mediterranean spaces of Italy and Spain, whose inhabitants were portrayed as volatile, treacherous and governed by uncontrolled passions – became not only socio-political antitheses to the “safe” space of England (although even this was ultimately unsettled by the characteristic gothic doubling), but also a symbol for the inner landscape of restriction, exposure to the other, temptation, the finding of a new balance, and return. In terms of more specifically psychological processes, the gothic journey and the projection of internal significance onto an external landscape might be read as various forms of representation and resolution (“projection” and “introjection,” the ebb and flow of life processes such as aging and the life cycle or desire, sexuality, tensions between two opposing selves). For examples of such readings of gothic literature, see Maud Bodkin’s reading of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination*; or Anne Williams’ essays on various gothic texts in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. In this mode of signification, landscape elements such as the sea, the sublime mountains, various forms of waste land, the dual-entry house, and so on, assume heavily-overdetermined meanings tied to the complexities of deep psychological processes.

Exoticised landscapes are thus always closely related to the trope of the gothic other – those Moors, Italians, Indians, Russians, Africans, Jews, East Europeans, and other strange types who crop up throughout gothic literature, and whose function is at least in part to embody the social and political anxieties of England’s encounters with its colonies and competitors. While colonial gothic narratives are most obviously concerned with the anxious placement of England vis-à-vis its colonial spaces, all gothic literature in varying ways reflects the anxiety of place in an age of growing global contact and interaction. Source: Goh, Robbie. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Letters

See pages 4, 8, 9. Letters to a phantom sister, wills, transcript, journal entries, newspaper entries; Gothic narratives are punctuated with embedded writings in the form of letters and entries that are both a pastiche and fragmented, the sum total of which makes up the complete text. Letters while seemingly presenting objectivity on one level through the assumed tone of factuality, are also simultaneously open and subject to interpretation. It is linked to a reading of words as well as a misreading. There are letters that are not replied in *Frankenstein*, letters that may not have reached their destination, letters of secrecy in *Jekyll and Hyde*, letters that chronicle events—these letters attempt to present to us an understanding of what happened, reiterated with the supposed advantage of retrospect

and an over-arching perspective that is allowed by the passing of time. However, as the paths of these letters are always dubious, it calls to attention its own in-authenticity and hence the potential for a misreading since we are never always sure if what we are reading is accurately represented. In other words, what has happened is always fragmented and there can be no complete reading of events.

These fragments also call to attention the reliability of information in an age where information is becoming increasingly available, as seen from the inclusion of newspaper reports in *Dracula* and the fact that distance is no longer a barrier to words. Some letters and entries, instead of being handwritten, are now type-written which displaces the personal touch of the writer from the reader and handwriting can no longer be a measure of authenticity. Anything, including words, can be reproduced. This links the idea of letters to modern communication and technology. The use of problematic embedded narratives illustrates an anxiety about the increasing ease of communication and whether more information really means knowing more. Narratives within narratives draw to attention its own artificiality and the question of whether there can be an original sequence of events behind what is narrated. At the same time, letters are also clearly letters of the alphabet which cues the reader in to the notion that all that is being read is a construct of "letters". Perhaps over-determined, but letters open the doors to the multitude of readings and misreadings in the Gothic world. (Felicia Chan, 2006)

Source: Chan, Felicia. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Religion

See pages 1, 12, 13. Christianity is both very much present and absent in Gothic literature. In *Dracula*, religion features prominently in the fight against the vampire – Van Helsing, Harker and Mina frequently invoke the name of God for supernatural and divine aid against the power of *Dracula*. Yet, there is also a disturbing sense that God is strangely absent, or at best, distant, within the novel. God's power seems limited – captured and contained within material shapes and symbols such as the Host, Indulgences, and the Crucifix. The men who hunt down *Dracula* are dependent on the trappings of religion without true substance. Christianity thus becomes reduced to transferable property. God is also sidelined in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. On one hand, while Biblical allusions to God as Creator abound in the novel, it is always in juxtaposition to the transgression of Victor Frankenstein as the mad scientist. Again, God is invoked only when an immediate threat is identified, as Victor laments and appeals to God to grant him the strength to defeat and destroy his monster. Christianity as the dominant religion in nineteenth century England was thoroughly interrogated and questioned, its beliefs in an Almighty God challenged as science and technology assumed prominence. Gothic authors, themselves questioning the relevance of religion, foregrounded these issues by presenting Christianity in a dubious light – present, but altogether powerless, shallow and somewhat deficient.

The Distressed Nun

Source: Fong, Minghui. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Bibliography of Related Information

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